

# GETTING HIS SHOT

*2nd Lt. Jozsef Jonas never gave up on his dream of flying*

by Louis A. Arana-Barradas

**W**hen 2nd Lt. Jozsef Jonas wings his T-6 Texan II over Texas' southern sky, he's having a ball. He doesn't think about the odds he beat to get there from his native Hungary.

No sir, it's time to fly. To excel. And to focus on becoming the best pilot he can be.

But when he lands and steps out of the cockpit, it's not hard to picture him grinning. Because with each training flight he's a step closer to his childhood dream of being a pilot. So the 85th Flying Training Squadron student pilot at Laughlin Air Force Base, Texas, can afford a smile.

"Maybe in six or seven months, I'll finally be a

military aviator," the 29-year-old said during his fourth month of undergraduate pilot training. "I'm just glad I got a shot at flying."

There were times, however, when he thought he'd never get to fly. When he felt the obstacles were too much to conquer. But each time he felt defeated, someone stepped in to help.

"I'm blessed," he said. "Many people prayed for me — so many people were behind me."

At his squadron, he's with "Elvis" Flight. One of 11 young men and women trying to earn their wings under the watchful eye of "the King." Each has a story to tell. But Lieutenant Jonas' path to the cockpit and the challenges he overcame are unlike that of any of his squadron mates.

For one thing, he was born in Hungary. He didn't think much about his future. But when he was 12 years old, he saw actor Tom Cruise portray the heroic pilot in the movie "Top Gun." Though a bad copy of a pirated German version, dubbed into Hungarian, the boy was awestruck.

"That's when I decided ... I wanted to become a military aviator," he said.

So he read about aviation. Went to air shows with his father, an army officer. At 16, he flew hang gliders. He excelled academically at school and won medals in track and field. Then, at 17, he applied for entry into the Hungarian air force college, where students spend four years earning a college degree and learning to fly. He passed the tough flight physical examination and enrolled in 1994. His ambition was to fly a MiG-21.

"Pilot training was never as intense in Hungary, not as hard as it is here," the lieutenant said.

But by his junior year, Lieutenant Jonas wasn't flying. Strapped for cash, the school cut pilot training. Fortunately, he was the top student and, as a junior in 1998, he earned a U.S. Department of Defense scholarship to attend undergraduate pilot training at Laughlin. First, he went through English language training at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. It opened his eyes.

**Getting a chance to fly,**

*that's all 2nd Lt. Jozsef Jonas ever wanted. He got it and now flies T-6 Texan II trainers at Laughlin Air Force Base, Texas. He plans on making the Air Force a career. "It took me so long to get here, it's almost a career already."*

by Master Sgt. Efrain Gonzalez





**When 2nd Lt. Jozsef Jonas graduated from Hungary's air force academy,** his wife, Lori, was at his side (here in front of the Hungarian parliament). It was hard for Lori to adapt to Hungary after growing up in southwest Texas. But, she said, "I love him. And I will always support him."



At Lackland, he said, "I realized all I'd learned about America while growing up, that it was a bad place — an imperialist country — wasn't true." Laughlin surprised him, too. The camaraderie he found was unlike anything he knew. He learned the Air Force wasn't just "a monster machine." And he learned that though he was an outsider, "Americans love an underdog."

"They are real people," Lieutenant Jonas said. "That's what makes the Air Force great."

He made many friends, including instructor pilot, Maj. Cliff Wilson. He also met Lori. From Del Rio, Texas, she said it was love at first sight. After earning his wings, the lieutenant took his future bride to his parent's home in Mezotur, Hungary. Then he went back to school, finished his senior year, and

courtesy photo

earned a degree in aeronautical transportation. Before he left Laughlin, Major Wilson gave him a Bible and told him, "God has great plans for you."

Lieutenant Jonas arrived at his first unit elated to know he'd fly MiG-21s. But there were few funds to fly. So he ended up staying home and working one day a week. After almost three years, and just 55 hours in the jet, deep inside he knew he didn't have a future in Hungarian aviation.

He thought his dream of flying was over. After much soul searching, the couple decided to return to Del Rio. He applied for, and got, an immigrant visa. He immediately called his pal, Major Wilson, and told him he wanted to join the Air Force. The major said he'd help.

The major, now a reservist, beat the bushes. He called whoever would listen and told them the lieutenant's story. In the meantime, Lieutenant Jonas became a substitute teacher at a Del Rio grade school, still longing to fly. After the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, he decided to do something, even if it meant not flying.

"Lori is an American. As her husband, I had become as American as anybody else," he said. "I felt I had to put something on the table to say I belonged here."

So he joined the Army and became a helicopter mechanic. He aced the school and became a "hooah" member of the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Ky. Soon he was in Mosul, Iraq, flying shotgun on a CH-47D Chinook supply helicopter. During this time, the president signed a law allowing residents serving in the military to become citizens without having to wait.

The lieutenant applied for citizenship. But his Immigration and Naturalization Service notice to show up for a citizenship appointment was lost. Lori called Major Wilson for help. He called Del Rio Mayor Dora Alcala, a staunch supporter of Laughlin and its Airmen. She wrote letters to Texas' senators, even the president. Sen. John Cornyn, took up the lieutenant's cause and expedited the proceedings. In Iraq, the Soldier's commander allowed him to leave early and return late from his "R&R" trip to Del Rio. During that time, the then-Army specialist took the oath of citizenship. A proud moment. He returned to Iraq as an American.

"I was happy. My childhood dream of flying," he said, loomed straight ahead.

Before returning to Iraq, the lieutenant applied for

an Air Force commission. Air Force recruiter Master Sgt. J.W. Davis took the lead to make it happen. He was persistent.

"He said whatever paperwork it took, however many forests he needed to knock down, he'd help me — then retire," Lieutenant Jonas said. The sergeant rattled the Army chain of command,

and the service agreed to let the lieutenant attend Officers Training School. "If I got my commission, they would release me. Had I failed, I'd have gone back to the Army."

He passed the selection board and finished OTS. In September 2004, Lieutenant Jonas went back to Laughlin to go through pilot training — again. Now the Jonas' live in base housing, and Lori is adapting to Air Force life. They also have a daughter, Maria, who is six months old.

"It's been an amazing ride," Lori said. "And there's more to come."

She's right. Lieutenant Jonas hopes to go into the fighter jet track, flying the T-38 Talon. If not, his time in Army aviation has made him fond of helicopters. He'll take whatever he gets. But Lori knows her husband wants to fly fighters.

"When he talks to me about being in a flight formation [she uses her hands to explain, just like a pilot], it's amazing," she said. "I see him in a fighter, a fighter pilot."

In his unit, Lieutenant Jonas passes his experience to classmates. It's his nature to be helpful.

"He's extremely polite and sharp, very sharp," fellow 2nd Lt. Joe Laveglia said. "He helps us with stuff we don't know. And if you see his grade sheets, you're blown away."

courtesy photo



**Sp4 Jozsef Jonas (right) served 11 months in Mosul, Iraq.** A CH-47D Chinook helicopter mechanic and side door gunner, his crew "dawgs" were (from left) Sp4 Derek Lowry and Sgt. Cory Bischof. The flag — given to him by Sen. John Cornyn of Texas — is the one in front of which the future pilot took his oath of citizenship. "It was a proud moment," he said.

Veteran fighter pilot Lt. Col. Dan Gernert is the squadron operations officer. He said the lieutenant is modest and has a great attitude for learning. And he's more mature.

"He's doing extremely well," the colonel said. "He's humble and not out to make a name for himself." All he wants is "to take his shot and get through pilot training."

That's all Lieutenant Jonas has ever wanted. But he said this opportunity would have never happened without the help of many people. He said all he's gone through has been possible because people who didn't know him "made an exception to all the rules and policies."

What the reserved young man doesn't volunteer is that his quiet resolve has as much to do with his getting to fly as anything, Lori said. She considers his positive attitude his best quality. But it's his unending desire to fly that truly amazes her.

"In this country, anything can happen," she said. "You just have to work at it."

Lieutenant Jonas is proof of that. He still has a ways to go before he earns his wings again. Until then, he'll continue to work hard.

That's the only way, he said, he'll ever be able to repay all those people who have done so much for him. Who have helped him realize his dream. ♡